Translanguaging and other parricidal régimes

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One measure of progress in sociolinguistic theory is when generalizations that are theoretically recalcitrant suddenly become expressible with a slight shift in perspective. These shifts have, invariably, offered new generalizable knowledge and/or empirical coverage that was not plausible within the old(er) paradigms. Lately, however, a new sociolinguistic humanism has fueled a kind of scholarly productivity that concerns itself often with (re-)discovering bi-/multi-lingual behaviors and quickly ‘labeling’ them variously as part of the new régimes of linguistic thought, inquiry, and analysis (see MacSwan 2017, Pavlenko 2018, Jaspers & Madsen 2019, Bhatt & Bolonyai 2019, 2022 Auer 2022, for some critiques). In these new régimes, several venerable constructs – language, dialect, variety, code – are dispensed with, erased, and sacrificed at the altar of a new sociolinguistics that discards the view of languages as discrete entities, as ontologically real entities with clear boundaries. Under this view, languages ‘do not exist as real entities in the world and … are the inventions of social, cultural and political movements’ (Makoni and Pennycook 2007:2), or are simply ‘convenient fictions’ (Widdowson 2012: 9) or ‘ideological constructions which match real-life use of language poorly’ (Jørgensen et al. 2011: 23) or “the pernicious myth that languages exist … there is ultimately no good reason to continue to posit their existence” (Pennycook 2006: 67).

In this talk I will focus on TRANSLANGUAGING, a term that has caught a fair bit of traction recently in the sociolinguistics of multilingualism, a term that has, in its various avatars, discarded the view of languages as discrete entities. I will argue that the construct translanguaging, and its associated architecture, is based on a fallacy of defective induction – e.g., Otheguy et al’s 2015 extension of culinary metaphor to linguistic systems – producing several faulty generalizations (cf. Auer 2022, Bhatt & Bolonyai 2022). I will specifically focus on ‘discreteness,’ and draw from a range of empirical sources to provide evidence to claim that multilingual repertoires do indeed exhibit distinct and discrete linguistic-epistemic inventories that are recruited routinely in complex ways in the production and comprehension of referential and social-indexical meanings. I will further argue that mobility and complexity of linguistic resources do not erase discreteness; in fact, it is precisely in the movement, juxtaposition and interaction of various mobile resources and spatiotemporal frames where the discreteness of codes, or language ‘archives’ (cf. Blommaert 2005), become significantly relevant in meaning-making.

In conclusion, I will claim that while new theoretical constructs/labels, like translanguaging, may have a socio-political aim to re-present multilingualism in second language classroom teaching, it does not need to do that by sacrificing established orders of understanding that have advanced the field, theoretically and empirically! Unfortunately, these new labels serve only as a cover for the absence of new theories and ideas in the sociolinguistics of multilingualism.